



Tucsonan gets Purple Heart 2 years after Iraq injury

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Tucsonan Ariel Hernandez Frayre will always remember Valentine's Day - but not for its chocolates and roses.

That was the day in 2006 when the U.S. Army veteran's truck in Iraq was blasted by an improvised explosive device.

Four men were on the truck; all survived. Three ended up in a troop clinic. Two received Purple Hearts. One, Staff Sgt. Hernandez Frayre, had to wait two years for the honor to come.

After he left Iraq in 2006, Frayre's medical records were lost in a computer failure, said U.S. Rep. Gabrielle Giffords, who helped iron out the mess.

"She made one phone call and that was it," Hernandez Frayre, 28, said at a ceremony outside Giffords' office Thursday.

"It's a great honor. I don't know what to say," he said. "I'm very excited."

Several family members attended, including 4-year-old daughter Elizabeth, who helped pin the medal on her daddy.

Tucsonan Michael Ryan of the Military Order of the Purple Heart was also on hand. He knows all too well about waiting for an award.

He received his Purple Heart 35 years after he was injured in Vietnam. His records, too, had been somehow overlooked.

Ryan's medal came with the help of former U.S. Rep. Jim Kolbe, Giffords' predecessor.

"I remember no one was there except my wife," Ryan said of the moment he received his medal. "There was no hoopla.

"I wanted to be here for support."

Along with Ryan, Hernandez Frayre is now among the ranks of the 189-member strong Tucson chapter of the Military Order of the Purple Heart, which meets monthly.

Thursday's gathering on a sunny lawn in Tucson was a far cry from where the family was two years ago.

Knowing the situation at home in early 2006, Hernandez Frayre didn't tell his family he was wounded in the blast.

"I didn't know about the injury when it happened," said his wife, Megan Hernandez, 27. "I was already stressed out."

While Hernandez Frayre was overseas being treated for injuries, his and Megan's twin sons - Angel and Daniel - were in intensive care, born four months premature.

The worried father was allowed to come home when one of the babies developed pneumonia and a collapsed lung.

Thursday, Hernandez Frayre was honored and his military service made known.

"We are glad he's home," said his dad, Mike Mason.

Though Hernandez Frayre has finished his time in the Army, he hasn't finished serving his country. He now works as a Border Patrol agent.

Born in Hermosillo, Mexico, Hernandez Frayre moved to the U.S. with his mother at 14.

Four years later, he enlisted in the Army and has since become a naturalized citizen.